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The end of the world, or civilization, is probably one of humankind's most horrifying fears. The apocalypse has been explored by many writers, and the decision to include this type of literature in a curriculum depends on how the situation is presented and resolved. The work should offer some solution and hope. Two recent works of apocalyptic fiction in the fantasy genre are Stephen King's "The Stand" and Frank Herbert's "The White Plague." Both novels avoid the modern cliche of global nuclear war and depict a gradual end of the world brought about by failures of government. While King's novel has mystical elements, Herbert uses a scientific approach to the apocalypse. Both novels, however, present some form of return to the basic values that died along with a vast percentage of the population. Both deal with the impending end of the world, as opposed to complete obliteration, thus giving the reader hope for a reformation of society. Other fears presented are a fear of science, a fear of chaos, a fear of evil, and a fear of things beyond human control. By reading these two novels, students may develop a "need" to stay informed as to what their society and government are heading toward. Apocalyptic fiction allows the reader to examine isolation, desperation, and frustration within society without having to encounter them in the real world. Apocalyptic fiction serves up moral and societal questions that students can ponder in a safe context. (Contains seven references.) (NKA)

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# Apocalyptic Fiction: Dealing with The End of The World in The Classroom

by

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# Apocalyptic Fiction: Dealing with The End of The World in The Classroom

The end of the world, or civilization, is probably one of humankind's most horrifying fears. The apocalypse, which James Egan (1984, p. 214) simply defines as "the myth of the end of the world," has been explored by many writers, including Mary Shelly and Shirley Jackson. The decision to include this type of literature in a curriculum depends on how the situation is presented and resolved. Does the work explore what has led the world to reach this point? Does the work present any solutions? Most importantly, does the work provide any hope? Andrew M. Greely (1986, p. 22) feels "The horror story is profoundly religious. It celebrates sometimes only tiny smidgens of hope, but hope, like goodness and love, need only to exist to finally win." Confronting fears, even in literature, is beneficial only if there is some hope of a resolution. It is essential then that fantasy stories have at least the prospect of hope in order to be effective.

Two recent, major works of apocalyptic fiction in the fantasy genre are Stephen King's *The Stand* and Herbert's *The White Plague*. Both novels avoid the modern cliches of a global nuclear war and depict a gradual end of the world brought about by failures of government. While King's novel has mystical elements involved, Herbert uses a scientific approach to the apocalypse. Both novels, however, present some form of return to the basic values that died along with a vast percentage of the population. Both deal with the impending end of the world, as opposed to complete obliteration, thus giving the reader hope for a reformation of society.

The impending destruction of society is not the only fear presented in these novels. There are many fears that accompany the central issue: a fear of science, a fear of evil, a fear of chaos, and a fear of things beyond human control. A fear of governmental policies and decisions which

the average citizen does not understand is also apparent. These are not irrational fears to have about society. By reading these two novels, students may develop a "need" to stay informed as to what their society and government are heading toward. Fantasy fiction is not only an escape from the real world; it can be a way of dealing with the problems faced in the real world.

Few readers are willing to spend time reading a novel that gives them little hope or nothing to ponder. Regarding *The White Plague*, William Coyle (1982, p. 32) says, "Essentially this is an exiting novel that holds a reader's interest while raising disturbing questions about terrorism, the nature of power, the folly of man's playing God, and the limits of scientific inquiry." Fantasy fiction allows the reader to realize his or her worst fears in a controlled environment. Reading apocalyptic fiction allows the reader to examine isolation, desperation, and frustration within our society without having to encounter them in the real world. The reader may emerge from the reading with a different view of society and its values.

In King's *The Stand* a majority of the population dies of a terminal virus called "Captain Trips". This highly contagious virus was incubated in a government laboratory and began to spread when an infected soldier escaped. The virus spread to everyone who had even the slightest contact with it, except for a select group of people that had a natural immunity. Unlike Herbert's *The White Plague*, *The Stand* does not focus on what happened at the lab or why the virus escaped. King focuses primarily on the near annihilation and reformation of society, while Herbert focuses on the political implications the disease brings about. In *The White Plague*, society is ultimately saved, but restructured. In *The Stand* it is destroyed, dispersed, and reformed.

*The Stand*, Douglas E. Winter argues (1982, p. 56), brings the Gothic tradition to the

foreground by invoking the "dual life" or "dual landscape" theme that is present in most Gothic fiction. He argues that "Gothic tradition has always played a major, but unspoken role in apocalyptic fiction." The duality to which Winter is referring is the pre-apocalypse world as compared to the desolate post-apocalypse world. This duality allows the reader to examine the individual's perceptions of American society. He adds, "Superimposing the illusions of our modern world upon the ravished landscape of catastrophe, King explores the strange mixture of myth and reality that comprises our perception of America" (1982, pp. 56-57). In order for a new world to emerge, the old world must first be destroyed. Egan (1984, p. 220) states, "the end of the old world is the simultaneous beginning of a new one." This is where the reader faces one of human- kind's worst fears. The reader must accept the death of the old world in order to embrace the new one. There is not only a duality of landscapes, but a duality of emotions as well. The realization of the apocalypse, for the survivors and readers, gives birth to the hope of renewal. Without this hope, there is no purpose for an apocalyptic novel.

King reinforces this theory by having Glen Bateman, a sociologist, killed shortly before the final confrontation between good and evil. Bateman was the only character presented with an educated view of the old American society. He is killed because the final confrontation between good and evil is going to determine the fate of the new world, not the old. Bateman is not even allowed to die with his two accomplices: Larry Underwood and Ralph Brentner. He, like society, becomes isolated and destroyed. The killing of Bateman is the final nail in the coffin of the old society. When Bateman is killed the implications become clear: the old world is never going to return. There is no hope for returning to the old society; hope lies with the rebirth of a new and, hopefully, better society. Winter (1982) points out the human need for order by relating:

> The paradoxes of myth and reality that seemingly riddle the fabric of American society are the Gordian Knot, split and unwinding in the ruins. This sociopolitical subtext poses difficult questions about order and authority. Humans need companionship, but companionship produces society, which in turn seemingly requires order. To have order, someone must have authority--and someone must be subject to authority. Order and authority benefit us by providing a stable society and technological change. However, they also mean oppression, the atomic bomb and the spectre of Captain Trips...(p. 61).

This duality exists because societal structure dictates that someone must be in authority and someone must be subordinate. It is this duality that leads to stability and technical progress, which in turn leads to destruction. Once society is destroyed, the individuals seek companionship, which results in the reformation of society, complete with the same structure that led to its destruction: authority and subordination. As long as there are human beings, there will be the need for society, and as long as there is society, humankind must beware of the power structure which allows the creation of a world ending plague such as Captain Trips.

Another element of duality King deals with is the confrontation between good and evil. Egan (1984, p. 221) relates that "In the post-apocalypse world it is necessary to accept the idea that a declaration for good or evil is unavoidable." There is no mistaking the two in The Stand. Randall Flagg is King's representation of evil. Winter (1982) states that:

> Flagg is neither Satan nor his demonic spawn. He is an atavistic embodiment of evil, the "last magician of rational thought."...Flagg is the epitome of the Gothic villian: his appearance is indistinct, malleable, a collection of masks....Like many

> Gothic villians, Flagg is curiously inept, helplessly watching his well-laid plans go awry at every turn. He is a rhetorician of self, seemingly obsessed with convincing himself and others of his importance and destiny. And as the novel's climax discloses, Flagg...is a straw man who literally collapses when confronted ( pp. 59-60).

Flagg is entirely evil while Mother Abigail is King's embodiment of good. Despite the fact that she is old and infirm, she imparts wisdom, humility, and strength along with a motherly instinct that clearly represents the American home (as opposed to the rational thought Flagg exudes). Winter (1982) points out the significance of these two characters by stating the following:

> The survivors of the plague are visited with strange and often highly personalized dreams involving two recurring images: a dark, faceless man offering enticement and threat, and an ancient black woman who exudes peace and sanctuary. These images form the parameters of choice between good and evil in which each individual's intrinsic predisposition plays an important role, and that choice divides the survivors into opposing camps: the evil forces at Las Vegas, the forces of good at Boulder, Colorado (pp. 57-58).

The survivors have a choice: good or evil, and it is very clear which one is which. It is important for students to recognize what is good and what is evil. King divides them so that there is no mistaking the two. The forces of evil in *The Stand* clearly point to death and permanent destruction. Bateman said shortly before his death that Flagg is "losing his magic now. It's slipping away from him and he knows it.... Shoot him now and save us all God knows how much bloodshed and dying" (King, 1978, p. 750). The only real hope lies in the camp of the good.

The duality motif present in *The Stand* is missing in *The White Plague*; it is replaced with modern political and scientific power struggles along with a focus on the reason for the plague: the madman. The political aspects of the novel are closely intertwined: without the madman and his plague, there would be no opportunity to acquire power, and without the political struggles for power, there would be no madman. This is the paradox that drives the novel and focuses a student's mind on the power of political control.

John Roe O'Neill, a molecular biologist, unleashes a plague that kills only women. His motivation stems from a bombing in Dublin, Ireland that claimed the life of his wife and two children. Taking credit for the bombing was a division of the Irish Republican Army, called the Provos. O'Neill and his family are nothing more than pawns caught up in a political struggle for recognition and power. O'Neill utilizes his skills as a scientist to enact his revenge. The political involvement becomes more detailed when decisions have to be made as to quarantining unexposed people, isolation of entire countries, and the possible nuclear sterilization of geographic areas. Herbert's novel focuses primarily on the government's struggle to deal with and contain the disease, thereby ensuring the continuation of humankind. Although the focus appears to be on saving the population from the plague, Coyle (1982) points out that this may be a bit misleading by stating:

> When his (O'Neill's) warnings, signed Madman, are ignored, he disseminates the plague throughout the world. The most depressing aspect of the novel is the conduct of political, military, and scientific leaders. Even as they cooperate to save mankind, they cynically maneuver to attain power for themselves (p. 32).

The plague is a vehicle which the world powers use to obtain more strength. The simple fact that

they completely ignore O'Neill's warnings, then scramble to come up with a cure shows a great deal of political failure. Had they responded immediately they may have been able to alleviate some of the damage done by the plague. Unfortunately, they allow the situation to mushroom into a global threat, then try to come up with a cure in order to have credit for being the country to "save the world from the plague." Actions are not taken to protect the individual, but to benefit the controlling factions of society.

Some critics dislike this focus of the book. Coyle states, "As might be expected in a novel stressing action and ideas, characterization is rather shallow." Gerald Jonas (1983) concurs by adding:

> This is precisely the point where most novels that deal with global disaster fall apart. Armageddon is a tough act to follow. No matter how many generals and popes and presidents try to pick up the pieces, their posturings are bound to seem anticlimactic (p. 15).

The political focus is the reason that characterization is shallow. To the political bodies involved, the indivual's function in society is secondary to the recognition that goes along with being the "world leader in plague research." This is not a novel rich in characterization, nor does it intend to be. Students can read this novel without getting too emotionally attached to any of the characters, face questions as to the priorities of our government, and deal with the impending end of the world. There is an added element of fear in this novel because the population must sit back and wait for those in charge and those with the knowledge to do something to end the plague. This type of fear was missing in *The Stand* because the plague struck so quickly and without any pattern. Nobody had the time or the knowledge to do anything about it.

An interesting twist in *The White Plague* is that O'Neill's plague leads to the discovery of medical knowledge which aids in the development of cures for many diseases, including cancer. The duality of *The Stand* is nowhere to be found in this novel. Something beneficial is derived from something with evil intent. The plague itself is brought on by a man who should be curing diseases, not creating them. Governments struggle for power, yet still try fervently to come up with a cure. There is no clear division of good and evil. Even O'Neill himself is not entirely portrayed as evil, as Jonas (1983) points out:

> Never has the mad scientist been presented with such loving care. The pain of bereavement splits O'Neill in two; out of the cleavage arises a "new" personality who takes the name of John O'Donnell. Although O'Donnell is aware of what he calls "O'Neill-Within," he feels no guilt. Like everyone else in the world that O'Neill has wrought, he considers himself an innocent victim (pp. 15, 21).

Nothing is completely evil or completely good in *The White Plague*. There is no final confrontation between good and evil, but a candid portrayal of a true struggle for power.

Perhaps the most shocking implication is the effect of the plague after a cure is found. Being that the world population ratio was said to be at least 10,000 men to one woman, women are allowed to have secondary husbands, and children born after the plague take on the last names of the mother; the father's last name becomes secondary. Women keep their last names as well. Women are said to be shipped to "crisis" areas and expected to produce female children. Thanks to O'Neill, the knowledge of the DNA molecule allows medical and government personnel to determine the sex of babies, and even change it, shortly after conception. Life expectancy is rumored to approach 5000 years. Due to the severe drop in population, all forms of birth control

are outlawed. All of these situations indicate the uses of power in a crisis situation. More importantly, Herbert displays the folly of man playing God. Not only can long standing societal rules and tradition be shattered in the wake of a crisis, so can moral and religious concerns. This novel, according to Coyle (1982, p. 15), shows "catastrophe averted or mitigated by man's willingness to discard traditional behavior patterns...."

Apocalyptic fiction allows the reader to examine not only things that may not happen, but reasons why things in society are they way they are. People may not hold traditions to be terribly important until a crisis occurs to force society to change them. Also, apocalyptic fiction serves up moral and societal questions that students can ponder in a much safer context. It is much safer to explore the implications (of the end of the world) without having to actually experience the apocalypse.

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